97-84201-22

Webb, Sidney

The principles of the Labour Party

London

[1919?]

97-84201-22
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  6  100 1   Webb, Sidney, d 1859-1947.
  7  245 14  The principles of the Labour Party h [microform] / c by Sidney
& Beatrice Webb.
  8  260     London : b Labour Party, c [1919?]
  9  300     [4] p. ; c 20 cm.
 10  440  0  New series (Independent Labour Party (Great Britain) ; v no. 4
 11  500     Caption title.
d to be filmed in 1997. e 1 microfilm reel ; 35 mm.
 13  583     Filmed; f NEH Project (FMEST); c 1997
 14  700 1   Webb, Beatrice Potter, b 1858-1943.
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RESTRIC

TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

FILM SIZE: 35mm REDUCTION RATIO: 9:1 IMAGE PLACEMENT: IA (IIA) IB IIB

DATE FILMED: 9-30-97 INITIALS: AP

TRACKING # : 28168

FILMED BY PRESERVATION RESOURCES, BETHLEHEM, PA.

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE LABOUR PARTY

BY SIDNEY & BEATRICE WEBB

THE reorganisation of the Labour Party compels us once more to think out the principles on which the Party is based. We do not mean the Party Programme, or the particular issues on which it will fight the forthcoming General Election. Behind the programme of any Party which is more than a machine for getting men into office there must lie intellectual principles and moral aims; and it is in the real presence of these in the communion, one with another, of the mass of members of the Party, that its salvation resides. It is often said that the intellectual basis of the Labour Party is Socialism itself. But what, from this standpoint, is Socialism?

§ I. Revolt against Inequality of Circumstance

We are in revolt against the present inequality of circumstance—summed up in the fact that one-tenth of the population owns nine-tenths of the wealth, and two-thirds of them, that is to say, the manual working class, obtain for all their needs only one-third of the produce of each year's work. We see that this inequality means, to the multitude who are poor, maimed faculties and thwarted desires, unnecessary disease and premature death, and, in the worst cases, squalid bestiality and demoralisation of body and soul. We know that it means to the minority, who are rich, an extraordinary callousness and a naïve insolence, the more insidious in that it is unselfconscious, whilst in the worst cases we have a fantastic licentiousness. We do not attribute this tragic division of our race into the rich and the poor to any exceptional cruelty or greed among those who happen to be wealthy; nor to any exceptional lack of capacity or industry among those who happen to be poor. We realise, what the economists have taught us, that this evil distribution of material resources is an inevitable result of the "Law of Rent" in a society based on the private ownership of land and capital. It can be remedied only by the vesting of land and capital in common ownership. But a mere transfer of land and capital to representatives of the community—whether elected by the consumers or by the producers of services or commodities—would not, in itself, bring about equality of circumstance. The nation would still have to decide how the annual aggregate of produce should be shared. We suggest that in this matter the community must deliberately "choose equality"; and it is this voluntary choice of equality that is one of the fundamental principles of the Labour Party.

Exactly as it is bad manners for the members of a family or of a social club to grab at the best food, or push for the most comfortable seat, so it must become recognised as bad manners for the individual citizen to insist on having for his personal consumption more than a fair share of the national income. And the duty of working for one's living must be recognised with equal universality. It will be held to be intolerable that any healthy adult should, under any pretext whatever—least of all merely on the plea that he or she is possessed of "riches"—shirk the obligation of working regularly by hand or by brain in the common service. Alterations in the law of property will be at once the sign and the sanction of the voluntary and deliberate choice of equality.

§ II. Transcending the Struggle for Life

Our opponents urge that any such choice of equality would defeat the "struggle for life," and that this struggle for life, manifested within a nation in the competitive system is, like war between nations, a "biological necessity," without which neither the fittest individual nor the fittest race would survive. Socialists have watched this struggle between one man and another for food, clothing, and shelter as it goes on to-day wherever the Capitalist system prevails, and they find that it does not lead to the survival either of the fittest individual or of the fittest organisation of society—if by fittest is meant the most highly developed individual and the most civilised society practicable in a given place and at a given time. On the contrary, we see that the results of the struggle on the character and intellect of the race are not good, but, as a matter of fact, predominantly bad. So much is this the case that the propertied class, who alone have the option of engaging in or refraining from this struggle for existence, do all that they can to ensure that their own children shall never be subjected to its "bracing" influence. As to the results of the struggle on the evolution of society, it is sufficient to note, on the one hand our palaces, and on the other our slums—to remember our conspicuous neglect of science, art and religion—in order to realise how very far we are from "civilisation."

The policy of the Labour Party is to transcend the struggle for life on the material plane and divert the racial effort to higher things. By the "Policy of the National Minimum" we can nowadays guarantee to every worker, in all the contingencies of life, an unbroken sufficiency of the means of healthful existence. By the public appropriation of the surplus continually arising above the "National Minimum," the nation can not only develop its material resources, but also provide for a continuous improvement of the physical health and of the intellectual, artistic, and spiritual faculties of the whole people—achieving, in fact, not only an expansion of individual character, but also an advance in national civilisation as yet undreamt of by our commercial millionaires.

§ III. Participation in Power and "Consciousness of Consent"

It is part of the fundamental principles of the Labour Party that this process of transcending the struggle for life cannot be successfully carried out without the willing consent and active participation of the whole body of citizens. But complete Democracy does not mean a single, centralised governmental administration of things and people. Human life has many aspects. We are all consumers of myriads of things; whilst we are, or ought to be, all producers of particular commodities or services. We have intellectual, artistic, and spiritual aspirations of even greater importance than material production. We have tastes and interests in common with this group or that. Hence the Socialist State aimed at by the Labour Party is not one homogeneous, bureaucratic "Democracy," imposing ruthlessly on all minorities what it calls the "General Will"; but an ever-shifting hierarchy of differently constituted Democracies for different purposes; partly central and partly local; some voluntary, some compulsory; some of consumers, others of producers; associated sometimes on the basis of geographical neighbourhood and sometimes on that of a community of intellectual, artistic or spiritual aims. It is by this high evolution of the social organism that the individual achieves the greatest freedom of self-expression. It is in the widest possible sharing out of self-government that we find that universal participation in power and consciousness of consent, without which there can be no genuine Democracy.

§ IV. The Use of the Scientific Method

But whilst right desires and aspirations are essential, they do not in themselves suffice for getting the social order that we want. We can no more change society merely by wishing for its regeneration than, without engineering science, we could build a bridge. The Labour Party rightly insists on the need for an organised science of society, on the investigation of the facts of social life and on the advancement of economic and political science, which it is always the instinct of the reactionary to oppose. This faith in science is involved in the substitution of co-operation for competition. Where our forefathers saw a jostling crowd of individual competitors, each instinctively pursuing his desire for riches in his own way, fighting for his own hand with no more "science" than his intuitive appreciation of the "smell of the market," the Socialist forecasts a highly organised, far-reaching, and patiently pursued communal enterprise. Every kind of co-operation among men requires a coherent plan which can be explained to the participants, and which will, in its working, so far conform to the nature of things as to be practicable at a given place at a given time. And this science will, it is plain, be continually expanding, and its application, no less than the changing circumstances of the world, will demand per-

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pet ial changes in social organisation, leading, in every decade, to an enlarg ement of mental vision, a new orientation of social aims, and the "sc apping" of obsolete structure at a rate of which this stagnant world of prc perty-owners is incapable. The last thing of which Socialism can be acc used is that of projecting a rigid and unchanging Utopian State.

§ V. Faith in International Morality

The Labour Party realises that its fundamental principles are as applicable, in substance, to the relations between nations as to the relations between the citizens of each nation. The doctrine that war is a "biological ne essity," beneficial to humanity, Socialists regard as at once demonstrably unscientific and profoundly immoral; they believe that it is now possible to transcend the "struggle for life" between races as it is between individuals, and to raise the relations between States to a higher plane. Socialists are in revolt against the inequality of circumstance which enables one nation to exploit another and to deny to the members of any subject race the consciousness of consent and participation in power. They do not see, as between the various races of humanity, that all the superiorities are heaped up on the peoples of any one blood, or colour, or religion, and all the inferiorities on those of others. On the contrary, nearly every people has something of its own in which it is superior even to the most conquering of races; and our proper attitude is that of a modest recognition of reciprocal superiorities. Socialists affirm the right of each people to live out its own life. But this is only possible when the principle of the Brotherhood of Man is embodied in some sort of League of Nations or Supernational Authority, which shall maintain the rule of public right against all international aggression; and work out (and be perpetually improving) the necessary body of international regulations for the mutual intercourse of sovereign nations and their several citizens. Here, again, as within the nation or State, Law is the mother of Freedom.

Published by the Labour Party, 33 Eccleston Square, London, S.W. 1
Price 3s. per 100; £1 per 1,000, carriage paid.
100M—2-1919 New Series—No. 4.

Printed at the Pelican Press, 2 Carmelite Street, E.C.4

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TITLE